

Lesson Unit 2: The Buddha

Learning Outcomes:

At the completion of the lesson students will be able to

- a. Describe the meanings associated with the words 'Buddha', and 'Bodhisatta'
- b. Describe both the Long Chronology and the Short Chronology used to decide the date of the Buddha
- c. Explain the biographical details of the historical Buddha
- d. Explain key epithets and virtues of the Buddha
- e. Identify early biographies of the Buddha

Student Activities:

- Read each of the Readings carefully and underline/highlight the key words and concepts in each reading.
- Draw a mind-map around the main topic linking the key words and concepts that you underlined or highlighted in the readings showing their relationship to the main topic and also to each other
- Read the given original sources to be familiar with the texts
- Prepare a time-line of the major events in the life of the Buddha based on either the Long Chronology or the Short Chronology

For your Journal, write detailed notes on the following: Past Buddhas, Bodhisatta, Date of the Buddha

Reading 1: Religious Background

A Time of Radical Thought and Speculation

The period from the sixth through the fourth centuries BCE is described as a time of radical thought and speculation not only in India but also around the globe. In India, this could be seen in the Upanishadic sages and the communities of ascetic wanderers. These intellectual and religious movements were fostered by the formation of cosmopolitan empires such as the Mauryan Empire in India. Urban centers were established and soon became the local points around which a new kind of life was organized. A significant number of people, cut off from the old sources of order and meaning, were open to different ways of expressing their religious concerns and intellectual endeavor. Both Buddhism and Jainism began responding to this kind of situation in northeastern India.

Hybrid Civilization in India

By this time, India had gone far in developing its distinctive hybrid civilization, which united two streams of civilizing influence. The first came from the northwestern region, the great riverine civilization of the Indus Valley (circa 2300 to 1600 BCE). We know little of the religious beliefs and practices of this civilization as its writing remains undeciphered. A second stream entered northwest of India over the Khyber Pass beginning around 1600 BCE. It was brought by Indo-Aryan invading peoples speaking an early Vedic form of Sanskrit. They brought with them Indo-European forms of culture. Their priests were the Brahmins who recited verses (mantras) during their sacrificial rituals. They spread a religious form ancestral to later Hinduism called Brahmanism (circa 1500 to 500 BCE).

Orthodox verses Non-orthodox

Consequently, by the time of the Buddha's birth, north Indian religion was complex. It was made up of local indigenous cults derived from the religion of the Indus Valley; the Brahmanical overlay, considered an "orthodox," or rather "orthoprax," (enjoining proper action) tradition; and organized nonorthodox groups of ascetic religious seekers called sramana (striver). **These sramanic groups generally denied the authority of the orthodox Brahmanism**, in both ritual forms seen in their Vedas and speculation contained in the Upanishads. They abandoned the family and its orthoprax ritual life, generally giving up normal work and social status to live by begging. These strivers wandered around, dwelling outside the villages in forest asramas (places of spiritual striving) and forming unstable congregations around masters who propounded a wide diversity of teachings. The Buddha was a concept of the sramanic groups.

Reading 2: Buddha and Bodhisatta

Awakened One

The term "Buddha" is not a proper name, but a descriptive title meaning "Awakened One" or "Enlightened One." This implies that most people are seen, in a spiritual sense, as being asleep – unaware of how things really are. In many contexts, "the Buddha" is specific enough, meaning the Buddha known to history, Gotama.

Fully Awakened Buddhas and Individual Buddhas

From its earliest times, though, the Buddhist tradition postulated other Buddhas who have lived on earth in distant past ages, or who will do so in the future. All such Buddhas, known as *samma-sambuddhas*, or "perfect fully Awakened Ones," are nevertheless seen as occurring only rarely within the vast and ancient cosmos. More common are those who are "buddhas" in a lesser sense, who have awakened to the truth by practicing in accordance with the guidance of a perfect Buddha such as Gotama: arahats. There are also said to be paccekabuddhas, "individual Buddhas" who attain enlightenment without the benefit of a perfect Buddha's teaching, and who give no systematic teachings themselves.

Role of the Fully Awakened Buddha

The key role of a perfect Buddha is, by his own efforts, to rediscover the timeless truths and practices of Dhamma at a time when they have been lost to society (AN I, 286-7). Having discovered it for himself, he skillfully makes it known to others so that they can fully practice it for themselves and so become arahats (MN III, 8). Teaching Dhamma, he initiates a spiritual community of those committed to Dhamma: four assemblies (parisa) consisting of monks and nuns, and laymen and laywomen followers. Any of these who gain true insight into Dhamma becomes a member of the Noble Sangha (stream-enterers, once-returners, non-returners and arahats).

Gender Matters

As to gender, the early texts say that while a woman can be an arahant, it is impossible for her to be an arahant who is also a perfect Buddha (MN III, 65-6; AN I, 28), just as a female cannot be a cakkavatti ruler, a Sakka – chief of the thirty-three gods of the Vedic pantheon – a great Brahma deity, or a Mara, an evil tempter-deity. Gender is something that can change between rebirths, however. Theravāda tradition saw it as necessary for a person to be male to be a bodhisatta, one heroically aiming at perfect Buddhahood.

Bodhisatta

The process of becoming a Buddha is seen to take many lives of dedicated practice. It is held that "a hundred thousand eons and four incalculable periods ago," in one of his past lives, Gotama was an ascetic named Sumedha who met and was inspired by a previous Buddha, Dipankara. He therefore resolved to strive for Buddhahood, by becoming a bodhisatta, a being (*satta*) who is dedicated to attaining perfect enlightenment (*bodhi*) (Buddhavamsa ch. 2). He knew that, while he could soon become an enlightened disciple of Dipankara, an arahant, the path he had chosen instead would take many lives to complete. It would, however, culminate in his becoming a perfect Buddha, one who would bring benefit to countless beings by rediscovering and teaching the timeless truths of Dhamma in a period when they had been forgotten by the human race. He then spent many lives, as a human, animal and god, building up the moral and spiritual perfections necessary for Buddhahood. Some of these lives are described in what are known as Jataka stories, of which there are 547 in the Theravadin collection (canonical verses plus commentarial prose expansion). Over the ages, he also met other past Buddhas. In his penultimate life he was born in the Tusita heaven, the realm of the "delighted" gods. This is said to be the realm where the bodhisatta Metteyya (Maitri/ Maitreya) now lives, ready for a future period in human history long after Buddhism has become extinct, when he will become the next Buddha (DN II, 76).

Arahant Ideal

In the Theravāda, Buddhas were seen as very rare in human history, and to differ from (other) arahants mainly in that they rediscovered the liberating truth when it had been lost to human society, and had a more extensive knowledge than (other) arahants. Dedicated followers of the Theravāda generally aimed to use the Buddha's teachings to help liberate themselves from *samsāra*, the round of rebirths, as quickly as possible, by becoming arahants.

Is Arahant Selfish?

That arahants came to be seen as somewhat selfish by the Mahāyāna may be partly a product of certain people claiming to be arahants who were not yet perfect. For a Theravadin, the notion that an arahant is selfish is absurd. Such a person is, by definition, one who has destroyed the "I am" conceit, the very root of selfishness; they are also characterized as being compassionate (AN I, 211). The best type of person is one who both works for his or her own spiritual welfare and is a good teacher of others (AN II, 95).

Buddhahood is the Highest Ideal

Moreover, Theravadins acknowledge that Buddhahood is a higher goal than arahantship. The Theravadin commentator Buddhaghosa says, of moral virtue: "that motivated by craving, the purpose of which is to enjoy continued existence, is inferior; that practiced for one's own deliverance is medium; the virtue of the perfections practiced for the deliverance of all beings is superior" (Visuddhimagga 13).

Sravakayana and Bodhisatta-yana

Theravadins agree that the path to Buddhahood is a longer one than that to arahantship. As this world still has the Buddha's teachings to guide it, though, it is seen as appropriate for most to use these and take arahantship as their highest goal, whether this be attained in the present or a later life. Thus most Theravadins can be seen to be *sravaka-yana* in their level of motivation. Nevertheless the tradition holds out the possibility, for a heroic few, of taking the long path of the Bodhisatta. Thus the bodhisatta-yana is the normative path in the Mahāyāna, it is an optional path in the Theravāda.

Three kinds of Buddhas

Theravadins may select which of three kinds of Buddhas, or awakened ones, they aspire to become: a disciple Buddha or arahant, an individual Buddha, or a perfect Buddha who rediscovers the Dhamma and teaches it to others. In the Cariyapīṭaka Commentary, one dedicated to the first of these goals is referred to as a *savaka-bodhisatta*, and one dedicated to the last as a great (*mahā*) *bodhisatta*. In most contexts, though, the term *bodhisatta* refers to the latter.

Reading 3: Dates of the Buddha

Long and Short Chronologies

Indian culture has not been as concerned with recording precise dates, so datings cannot always be arrived at with accuracy. A key reference point for dating the Buddha is the inauguration of the reign of the Buddhist emperor Aśoka. There are references in Aśokan edicts to the sending of ambassadors to certain Hellenistic kings, an event generally dated by scholars at c. 268 BCE. The Pali sources of Theravāda Buddhism say that the Buddha died 218 years before this: the "long chronology." As all sources agree that Gautama was eighty when he died (DN II, 100), this would make his dates c. 566-486 BCE. An alternative "short chronology" is recorded in Sanskrit sources of north Indian Buddhism preserved in East Asia, according to which he died 100 years (or something more) before Aśoka's inauguration, which would make his dates 448-368 BCE – though in East Asia, the traditional date of the Buddha's death was actually 949 or 878, and in Tibet, 881 BCE. In the past, modern scholars have generally accepted 486 or 483 BCE for this, but the consensus is now that they rest on evidence which is too flimsy.

Carbon dating indicates that certain sites associated with the Buddha in the Pali Canon were not settled prior to 500 BCE (plus or minus 100 years), which makes the Buddha's death unlikely to have been as early as 486 BCE (Hartel 1991-2). Moreover, a consideration of Jain historical data suggests that both the Buddha and Mahavira, the Jain leader, who died a little before the Buddha, died between 410 and 390 BCE.

Richard Gombrich's Argument

Richard Gombrich has argued that, as a result of recent research of Hellenistic historians, Aśoka's consecration may be dated anywhere between 267 and 280 BCE. Moreover, 100 and 218 (like our "two centuries and a score years") are best seen as ideal round numbers. Gombrich has calculated a number between 218 and 100-136 from figures associated with a lineage of teachers in the *Dipavamsa*, a chronicle of Sri Lanka. This ends with the death of a king that occurred in 303 CE, though earlier parts of the text and certainly its sources could be rather earlier. The figure of 218 years itself comes from the *Dipavamsa* (6.1), though Gombrich holds that it is based on a misunderstanding of figures in an earlier part of the text. The focus of the early chapters of the *Dipavamsa* is on monastic matters, and especially the authentic transmission of the *vinaya* or monastic code of discipline. By collating various figures in the text, supplemented by some from the later *Mahavamsa* chronicle, and reinterpreting what some of them refer to, thus removing internal inconsistencies, he derives the following information:

- 16 AB (after the death of the Buddha), the Vinaya expert Upali (aged sixty) ordains Dasaka, who is likely to have been twenty, minimum age for ordination as a monk.
- 33 AB, Dasaka (aged thirty-seven) admits Sonaka (aged fifteen) as a novice.
- 41 AB, Dasaka (aged forty-five) ordains Sonaka (aged twenty-three) as a monk.
- 52 AB, Sonaka (aged forty) ordains Siggava (probably aged twenty).
- 102 AB, Siggava (aged sixty-four) ordains Tissa (probably aged twenty).

136 AB, Tissa is aged fifty-four at the inauguration of Aśoka; Mahinda is fourteen.

142 AB, Tissa (aged sixty) ordains Mahinda, aged twenty.

Gombrich explains that, as a result of the numbers being given in round years, thus discounting part years, there is a margin of error for the figure of 136, so that the correct figure could be between 132 and 142. Given the additional uncertainty of the date of Aśoka's inauguration, this gives the date of the Buddha's death as between 422 and 399 BCE, with a greater likelihood for a date in the middle of this range.

Why the discrepancy with the Dipavamsa's own assertion that Aśoka was inaugurated as emperor 218 years AB? Gombrich argues that: (1) the text is more approximate on dates relating to kings than to monks; (2) 218 is the sum of conventional numbers 100 + 100 + 18, noting that while the second council is said to have been 100 AB, evidence indicates it was 60 AB; (3) in a damaged part of the text (Dipavamsa 5.95), a list of ages at death for a lineage of monks adds to 219 if taken as years lived after ordination (giving an implausible average age of ninety-two), and it was mistakenly read this way by the monk who continued the text from Chapter 6; (4) a list of years for a line of monks (Dipavamsa 5.96) is not the age at which they became "patriarchs" (there was no such role then), but is the length of time they knew the Vinaya by heart, between learning it as novices and dying; such a reading removes discrepancies in the Dipavamsa figures that arise from other interpretations.

There exists no final scholarly consensus as yet for the Buddha's dates – Cousins finishes his review of the evidence by talking of a "reasonable probability" of a date around 400 BCE for the Buddha's death – though if one sets aside the margins of error that Gombrich acknowledges, his research indicates 484-404 BCE. Bringing the date of the Buddha forward, note, does not necessarily place him in a later phase of the development of Indian religion. This is because the Hindu Upanisads are themselves generally dated relative to the Buddha's dates.

Traditional Dating in Theravāda Countries

In Theravāda countries, the traditional dating – of uncertain antiquity – places the "long chronology" and a misdating of Aśoka's inauguration. On this basis, Theravadins celebrated 1956 as "Buddha Jayanti" year, the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's final nirvāṇa. This was regarded as a time of resurgence in Buddhism. The new dating of the Buddha's death as c. 404 BCE would make 1997 the 2,400th anniversary of the Buddha's final nirvāṇa, 2097 as the 2500th anniversary of this, and 2017 the 2,500th anniversary of his birth. As Buddhism is seen to decline over the ages (SN II, 24) a later date for the Buddha is, from a Buddhist perspective, good news!

Peter Harvey (Encyclopedia of Buddhism, edited by Damien Keon and Charles S. Prebish, Routledge, London, 2007).

Reading 4: Life of the Sakyamuni Buddha

Although the historical Gautama Buddha was a renouncer and an ascetic, the style of renunciation and asceticism that he practiced and recommended was mild by Indian standards. He experimented with the practices of renunciants – begging, wandering, celibacy, techniques of self-restraint, and the like. He organized a religious community in which discipline played a central role. Judging from the movement he inspired, he was not only an innovator but also a charismatic personality. Through the course of his ministry he gathered around him a group of wandering mendicants and nuns, as well as men and women who continued to live the life of householders.

Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, was born in the Sakya clan. The Sakyans were of the kshatriya or warrior caste. They lived in a border district on the northern Gangetic plain just

below the Himalayan foothills. Suddhodana, a king of Kapilavastu, was the father of Siddhartha, and Mahamaya was his mother.

As the legend has it, the future Buddha was innately different from ordinary men. He was conceived when his mother, Mahamaya, dreamed that a white elephant entered her body. When her time was approaching, she retired to the wooded garden of Lumbini, near Kapilavastu. Standing with her upstretched right hand on the branch of a tree, she gave birth to the future Buddha. The newborn child miraculously stood up, strode seven paces, and declared that this was his last birth – that he was destined for enlightenment.

Asita, an aged sage, examined the marks on the infant, and prophesied that he would become a Buddha. As some accounts specified, he would become such only if he chose to leave the palace to become a wandering ascetic; otherwise, he would become a world-ruling monarch (cakkavattin). The boy was named Siddhartha, "he who has achieved his goal."

Just seven days after giving birth to Siddhartha, Mahamaya died. Mahaprajapati, the sister of Mahamaya, brought up the young child. When he came of age, he was married to princess Yasodhara, whom his father had selected. As the legend has it, Suddhodana tried to prevent his son from leaving the palace and becoming an ascetic. He tied him down with sensual pleasures, not only arranging his marriage but also surrounding him with song-and-dance girls and every delight a man could desire. In due course Yasodhara bore Siddhartha a son, whom they named Rahula (the fetter), an indication that the young father's heart was already turning away from the household life.

As the legend tells, sheltered by his overprotective father from every hint of sorrow and suffering, Siddhartha went out for a chariot ride and saw a decrepit old man for the first time. Shocked by the scene, he asked his charioteer about the man's condition, and the charioteer declared that such is the destiny of all humans. The prince turned back to the palace and brooded in melancholy, taking no relish in the gaiety and pleasure around him. On a second occasion, he saw his first diseased man and reflected that people are foolish to revel under the constant threat of disease. On the third trip, he saw his first corpse; dismayed, he marveled that people could forget the fear of death and live heedlessly. On a fourth occasion, he saw a religious mendicant and made up his mind to leave the household life. In the depth of night the prince took a last look at his wife and infant son, mounted his horse, and rode out of the sleeping city, accompanied by his charioteer. Siddhartha dismounted, sent his charioteer back to Suddhodana with his ornaments and a message. Then he cut off his hair and wore simple ascetic clothes.

The new mendicant, then twenty-nine years old, went first to a teacher called Alara Kalama, who taught a kind of meditation leading to attainment of the trance state of nothing at all. The mendicant Siddhartha practiced the method and quickly attained the goal. Alara Kalama then set him up as his equal and co-teacher. But Siddhartha knew that the attained state was not the ultimate reality that he was seeking for. He turned down the offer and went away. Siddhartha then received training under Uddaka Ramaputta, who taught him the way to the attainment of the trance state of neither perception nor non-perception. Siddhartha mastered this dhamma, and was acclaimed a teacher. But he found the attainment unsatisfactory, and he went away.

The future Buddha then went eastward to Uruvela near Gaya. He found a pleasant spot and settled down to austerities. He fasted and came as close as he could to eating nothing at all, becoming utterly emaciated. He was joined in his striving by five ascetics, and he continued in this painful course for six long years. Realizing that by this severe self-mortification he had not achieved any sublime knowledge and insight, he tried to think of another way. He remembered an incident in his childhood when he sat under a shady tree while his father was plowing. At

that time, his mind had happened on a dispassionate equilibrium, a pleasant and zestful state. This past recollection pointed him a fruitful method, but Siddhartha's body was too weak to gain such a blissful experience. Siddhartha took to solid food, rice, and yogurt. The five mendicants then left him in disgust, saying that he had given up striving and living in abundance.

As the legend says, Siddhartha dreamed five dreams as an indication that he was about to become a Buddha. The next day he sat under a sacred tree. A woman named Sujata had vowed a yearly offering to this tree if she bore a son. The wish was fulfilled, and she prepared as offering a fine bowl of rice and milk. Her maid came upon the future Buddha sitting there, mistook him for the spirit of the tree, and reported the apparition to her mistress. Sujata rushed to the spot and presented the food to Siddhartha.

After taking the meal, Siddhartha went and sat under the Bodhi tree, facing east, and resolved not to arise until he attained enlightenment. Mara (Death) was alarmed at the prospect of the Bodhisattva's victory, which would allow him to escape from Death's realm. Mara came to assail him with an army of fearful demons. The future Buddha was protected, though, by his accumulated merit and his friendly love (maitri). After failing to shake him, the hosts of demons fled in defeat. Mara then invoked his own magic power to overthrow the future Buddha. But the future Buddha invoked his own superior merit, amassed through many previous lives. Mara called on his retinue to witness his merit; and the future Buddha having no other witness on his side, touched the earth with his right hand, and called Mother Earth to testify to his merit. The earth quaked in response. Then Mara, having failed with intimidation and compulsion, turned to temptation. He sent his three daughters, Discontent, Delight, and Desire, to seduce the future Buddha, who remained as impervious to lust as he had to fear. As the sun set, Mara and his hosts gave up and withdrew.

On the night of the full moon, the future Buddha ascended the four stages of trances which are characterized by concentration, insight, and release. Then he attained to three special forms of knowledge. During the first watch of the night (evening), the future Buddha acquired the first cognition, the recollection of his own previous existences, seeing them one by one, just as they had been. During the second watch (midnight) he acquired the divine eye, with which super knowledge he surveyed the decease and rebirth of other living beings. During the third watch (late night), he acquired the third cognition, that of the extinction of the outflows or mental defilements. He perceived the four noble truths, noting, "This is suffering, this is the source of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, and this is the path that leads to the cessation of suffering." His mind became free from the outflows.

The new day dawned on Siddhartha Gautama, now the Buddha. According to legend the animate and natural worlds celebrated the event with prodigies. The earth swayed, thunder rolled, rain fell from a cloudless sky, and blossoms fell from the heavens.

Reading 5: Epithets of the Buddha

One of the earliest form in which Buddhists have expressed and generated their image of Gautama Buddha was through the medium of epithets. As a canonical text has it, a householder named Upali, after becoming a follower of the Buddha, acclaims him with one hundred epithets, as an expression of his faith and respect. Over the centuries the enumerations of these and other epithets focused on the extraordinary aspects of the Buddha's person, on his marvelous nature. These epithets became a foundation for Buddhist devotional literature, and a support of devotional and contemplative practice.

Over the centuries countless epithets have been applied to the Buddha. But the epithet 'Buddha' itself has been a particular favorite for explanation. Even hearing the word Buddha can cause people to rejoice. The commentary on a canonical text says, "It is very rare indeed to hear the word Buddha in the world." Another Buddhist text says: "It is a name derived from the final liberation of the Enlightened Ones, the Blessed Ones, together with the omniscient knowledge at the root of the Bodhi tree; this name 'buddha' is designation based on realization."

Particular epithets emphasize specific qualities of the Buddha that might otherwise remain unemphasized. Thus the epithet "teacher of gods and men" is used to display the Buddha as one who helps others escape from suffering. A commentary records: "He teaches by means of the here and now, of the life to come, and of the ultimate goal, according as befits the case, thus he is Teacher. 'Teacher': the Blessed One is a caravan leader since he brings home caravans. Just as one who brings a caravan home gets caravans across a wilderness ... gets them to reach a land of safety, so too the Blessed One is a caravan leader, one who brings home the caravans; he gets them across ... the wilderness of birth."

Some of the epithets of the Buddha refer to his lineage and name: for example, Sakyamuni, "sage of the Sakya tribe," and his personal name, Siddhartha, "he whose aims are fulfilled." Some refer to religio-mythic paradigms with which he was identified: mahāpurusa means "great cosmic person"; cakravartin refers to the "universal monarch." Some epithets, such as bhagavan, convey a sense of beneficent lordship. Others, such as tathāgata ("thus come," or "thus gone"), retain an aura of august ambiguity and mystery.

Various epithets define the Buddha as having attained perfection in all domains. His wisdom is perfect, as are his physical form and manner. In some cases the epithets indicate that the Buddha is without equal, that he has attained "summit of the world."

A common refrain on the qualities of the Buddha (DN II, 93), now often chanted in a devotional context, is:

"Thus he is the Bhagavā, because he is an arahant, perfectly and completely awakened, endowed with knowledge and good conduct, well-gone, knower of worlds, an incomparable charioteer for the training of persons, teacher of gods and humans, Buddha, Bhagavā."

The epithets of the Buddha, in addition to having a central place in Buddhist devotion, are featured in the meditation known as the "recollection of the Buddha." This form of meditation, like all Buddhist meditational practices, had as its aim the discipline and purification of the mind. But, in addition, it was a technique of visualization, a way of recovering the image of the founder. This practice of visualization by contemplation on the epithets is important in the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, both monastic and lay.

Notes for Reflection

The Historical Buddha

Long Chronology based on the Pali sources: 566 - 486BC

Short Chronology based on the Sanskrit and Chinese sources: 448 - 368 BC

The word Buddha

- A title
- Root *Buddh* = to wake up, to understand
- Awakened One, Enlightened One, One who has attained bodhi, one who has realized the truth
- Discoverer of the Path ("the way trodden by ancient Buddhas")

Not a god or a human but a Buddha

Birth at Kapilavatthu

- Siddhartha Gautama (Siddhattha Gotama)
- Suddhodana and Mahāmāyā
- Buddha or Universal King
- Sākya
- Education
- Marriage at Kapilavatthu

Yasodara (wife) and Rahula (son)

Renunciation

- a sick person, an elderly person, a dead person, and an ascetic
- Yoga practice

Ascetic life

Enlightenment at Bodh-Gaya

- Defeating Mara (death and defilements)
- Extra-sensory knowledge (three: Retro-cognition, clairvoyance, knowledge of the waning of influxes). Three others: psycho-kinesis, clairaudience, and telepathy.
- Disclaiming of omniscience in the sense of knowing and seeing everything at all times.
- Stopping rebirth

First Dhamma Talk

- Five ascetics
- Four noble truths and the middle path

Teaching Life

- New religion (Dhamma), Middle Doctrine and Middle Path
- New Society (Sangha). No to caste system
- Demise at Kusinara

Other Names

- By the Buddha himself: Tathāgata (Thus-Gone One, Thus-Understood One)
- By the disciples: Bhagavant (Lord, Fortunate One)
- By others: Gotama, Sakyaputta (son of the Sakyas), Sakyamuni (Sage of the Sakyas)

Triple Gem

Statement of paying homage: *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*

Nine Qualities of the Buddha

- Worthy of esteem and respect (*araham*)
- Perfectly Enlightened (*sammāsambuddho*)
- Endowed with knowledge and conduct (*vijjācaraṇasampanno*)
- Well-gone (*sugato*)
- Knower of the world (*lokavidū*)
- Unexcelled/ incomparable tamer of human beings like an expert charioteer (*anuttaro purisadammasārathī*)

- Teacher of gods and humans (*satthā devamanussānaṃ*)
- Enlightened (*Buddho*)
- Fortunate (*bhagavā*)

Reading 6: Early biographies of the Buddha

The tradition of recounting biographical episodes is an integral part of early Buddhism. The most convincing argument for the very early development of a comprehensive biography of the Buddha has been made by Erich Frauwallner. On the basis of a brilliant text-critical analysis, Frauwallner argues for a basic ur-text of the Buddha biography. This no longer extant biography of the Buddha was complete up to the conversion of the two great disciples, Sariputta and Moggallāna, and was written approximately one hundred year after the Buddha's passing away and well prior to the reign of King Aśoka. This biography, Frauwallner maintains, was composed as an introduction to Khandhaka, a text of monastic discipline that was reportedly confirmed at the second Buddhist council. Appended to the Khandhaka, was an account of the Buddha's passing away, and of the first years of the fledgling monastic community. Frauwallner contends that all subsequent Buddha biographies have been derived from this basic ur-text.

Alfred Foucher, Etienne Lamotte, and Adre Bareau have argued that there was a gradual development of biographical cycles, with only a later synthesis of this material into a series of more complete biographies. According to this thesis, the earliest stages of the development of the Buddha biography are the fragments in the Sutra and Vinaya texts, which show no concern for chronology or continuity. The Sutra literature emphasizes stories of the Buddha's previous births, episodes leading up to the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment itself, and an account of his last journey, passing away, and funeral. The Vinaya texts, on the other hand, focus on the Buddha as teacher and incorporate – in addition to accounts of the events associated with his Enlightenment – narratives that describe the early days of his ministry, including an account of the conversion of his first disciples.

The oldest of the surviving autonomous biographies is the Mahavastu, an anthology written in Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit about the beginning of the common era. Among other autonomous biographies, were the Lalitavistara which played an important role in various Mahāyāna traditions; the Abhiniskramana Sutra which was especially popular in China; and the famous and popular Buddhacarita which was attributed to Ashvaghoṣa. The Vinaya of the Mulasarvastivādins written between the fourth and the fifth centuries is another autonomous biography. This voluminous compendium of biographical traditions provided later Mahāyāna schools with a major source for stories about the Buddha and his career. Almost all of the early autonomous biographies follow the Vinaya tradition, which ends the story at a point soon after the Buddha had begun his ministry. Only exception is the completed Chinese and Tibetan versions of the Buddhacarita.

These new autonomous biographies testify to three important changes that affected the traditions of Buddha biography during the centuries immediately following the death of King Aśoka. The first is the inclusion of new biographical elements drawn from non-Buddhist and even non-Indian sources. The second important change exhibited was the ubiquitous inclusion of stories about the Buddha's previous lives (jataka) as a device for explicating details of his final life and Gautama. The third discernible change is the increasing placement of emphasis on the superhuman and transcendent dimensions of the Buddha's nature.

Whereas the Mahāyāna accepted the early autonomous biographies and supplemented them with additional episodes of their own, the Theravāda community displayed a continuing resistance to developments in the biographical tradition.

Two types of Buddha biographies have had an important impact and role in the later history of the Theravāda tradition. The model for the classical type is the Nidanakatha, a text that serves as an introduction to the fifth century Jataka Commentary. It traces the Buddha's career from the time of his previous birth as Sumedha, when he made his original vow to become a Buddha, to the year following Gautama's Enlightenment, when he took up residence in the Jetavana monastery. The second type of Theravāda biography is the chronicle biography which illustrates a distinctive Theravāda understanding of the Buddha. From very early in their history the Theravadins had distinguished between two bodies of the Buddha, his physical body and his body of truth. After the Buddha's death, his physical body continued to be present to the community in his relics, and his body of truth continued to be present in his teachings.

From the Original Sources

Marvelous Qualities of the Buddha

Then the Blessed One addressed the Venerable Ānanda: "That being so, Ānanda, explain more fully the Tathāgata's wonderful and marvelous qualities."

"I heard and learned this, venerable sir, from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Mindful and clearly comprehending, Ānanda, the Bodhisatta appeared in the Tusita heaven.' That mindful and clearly comprehending the Bodhisatta appeared in the Tusita heaven—this I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Mindful and clearly comprehending the Bodhisatta remained in the Tusita heaven.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'For the whole of his lifespan the Bodhisatta remained in the Tusita heaven.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Mindful and clearly comprehending the Bodhisatta passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother's womb.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned this from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta passed away from the Tusita heaven and descended into his mother's womb, an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared in the world with its gods, Māra, and Brahmā, in this population with its ascetics and brahmins, with its gods and human beings. And even in those abysmal world intervals of vacancy, gloom, and utter darkness, where the moon and the sun, mighty and powerful as they are, cannot make their light prevail, there too an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared. And the beings reborn there perceived each other by that light: "So indeed, there are also other beings reborn here." And this ten-thousand-fold world system shook, quaked, and trembled, and again an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared in the world.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother's womb, four young gods came to guard him at the four quarters so that no humans or nonhumans or anyone at all could harm the Bodhisatta or his mother.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta had descended into his mother's womb, she became intrinsically virtuous, refraining from killing living beings, from

taking what is not given, from sexual misconduct, from false speech, and from wines, liquors, and intoxicants, the basis of negligence.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Other women give birth after carrying the child in the womb for nine or ten months, but not so the Bodhisatta's mother. The Bodhisatta's mother gave birth to him after carrying him in her womb for exactly ten months.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'Other women give birth seated or lying down, but not so the Bodhisatta's mother. The Bodhisatta's mother gave birth to him standing up.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother's womb, first gods received him, then human beings.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother's womb, he did not touch the earth. The four young gods received him and set him before his mother saying: "Rejoice, O queen, a son of great power has been born to you." This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother's womb, he came forth unsullied, unsmeared by water, humors, blood, or any kind of impurity, clean and unsullied. Suppose there were a gem placed on fine cloth, then the gem would not smear the cloth or the cloth the gem. Why is that? Because of the purity of both. So too when the Bodhisatta came forth ... he came forth clean and unsullied.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother's womb, two jets of water appeared to pour from the sky, one cool and one warm, for bathing the Bodhisatta and his mother.' This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'As soon as the Bodhisatta was born, he stood firmly with his feet on the ground; then he took seven steps facing north, and with a white parasol held over him, he surveyed each quarter and uttered the words of the leader of the herd: "I am the highest in the world; I am the best in the world; I am the foremost in the world. This is my last birth; now there is no renewed existence for me." This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

I heard and learned from the Blessed One's own lips: 'When the Bodhisatta came forth from his mother's womb, an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared in the world with its gods, Māra, and Brahmā, in this population with its ascetics and brahmins, with its gods and human beings. And even in those abysmal world intervals of vacancy, gloom, and utter darkness, when the moon and the sun, mighty and powerful as they are, cannot make their light prevail—there too an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared in the world. And the beings reborn there perceived each other by that light: "So indeed, there are also other beings reborn here." And this ten-thousand-fold world system shook, quaked, and trembled, and there too an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared in the world.' That when the Bodhisatta came forth from mother's womb, an immeasurable great radiance surpassing the divine majesty of the gods appeared in the world ... This too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One.

"That being so, Ānanda, remember this too as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathāgata: Here, Ānanda, for the Tathāgata feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear; perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear; thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear." Remember this too, Ānanda, as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Tathāgata."

"Venerable sir, since for the Blessed One feelings are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear; perceptions are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear; thoughts are known as they arise, as they are present, as they disappear—this too I remember as a wonderful and marvelous quality of the Blessed One."

Majjhimanikāya (III, 118-20; 122-24) Acchariya-abbhuta-sutta

Behind the Luxury

"Monks, I lived in refinement, utmost refinement, total refinement. My father even had lotus ponds made in our palace: one where red-lotuses bloomed, one where white lotuses bloomed, one where blue lotuses bloomed, all for my sake. I used no sandalwood that was not from Varanasi. My turban was from Varanasi, as were my tunic, my lower garments, and my outer cloak. A white sunshade was held over me day and night to protect me from cold, heat, dust, dirt, and dew.

"I had three palaces: one for the cold season, one for the hot season, one for the rainy season. During the four months of the rainy season I was entertained in the rainy-season palace by minstrels without a single man among them, and I did not once come down from the palace. Whereas the servants, workers, and retainers in other people's homes are fed meals of lentil soup and broken rice, in my father's home the servants, workers, and retainers were fed wheat, rice, and meat.

"Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: 'When an untaught, worldling, himself subject to aging, not beyond aging, sees another who is aged, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to aging, not beyond aging. If I — who am subject to aging, not beyond aging — were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is aged, that would not be fitting for me.' As I noticed this, the [typical] young person's intoxication with youth entirely dropped away.

"Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: 'When an untaught, worldling, himself subject to illness, not beyond illness, sees another who is ill, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to illness, not beyond illness. And if I — who am subject to illness, not beyond illness — were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is ill, that would not be fitting for me.' As I noticed this, the healthy person's intoxication with health entirely dropped away.

"Even though I was endowed with such fortune, such total refinement, the thought occurred to me: 'When an untaught, worldling, himself subject to death, not beyond death, sees another who is dead, he is horrified, humiliated, and disgusted, oblivious to himself that he too is subject to death, not beyond death. And if I — who am subject to death, not beyond death — were to be horrified, humiliated, and disgusted on seeing another person who is dead, that would not be fitting for me.' As I noticed this, the living person's intoxication with life entirely dropped away.

Decision to Teach

I considered: 'This Dhamma that I have attained is profound, hard to see and hard to understand, peaceful and sublime, unattainable by mere reasoning, subtle, to be experienced by the wise. But this population delights in attachment, takes delight in attachment, rejoice in attachment. It is hard for such a population to see this truth, namely, specific conditionality, dependent co-Arising. And it is hard to see this truth, namely, the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all acquisitions, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, Nibbāna. If I were to teach the Dhamma, others would not understand me, and that would be wearying and troublesome for me.' Thereupon there came to me spontaneously these stanzas never heard before:

Enough with teaching the Dhamma
That even I found hard to reach;
For it will never be perceived
By those who live in lust and hate.
Those dyed in lust, wrapped in darkness
Will never discern this abstruse Dhamma,
Which goes against the worldly stream,
Subtle, deep, and difficult to see.

Considering thus, my mind inclined to inaction rather than to teaching the Dhamma. Then, bhikkhus, the Brahmā Sahampati knew with his mind the thought in my mind and he considered: 'The world will be lost, the world will perish, since the mind of the Tathāgata, the Arahant, the Perfectly Enlightened One, inclines to inaction rather than to teaching the Dhamma.' Then, just as quickly as a strong man might extend his flexed arm or flex his extended arm, the Brahmā Sahampati vanished in the brahma world and appeared before me. He arranged his upper robe on one shoulder, and extending his hands in reverential salutation toward me, said: 'Venerable sir, let the Blessed One teach the Dhamma, let the Sublime One teach the Dhamma. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are perishing through not hearing the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma.' The Brahmā Sahampati spoke thus, and then he said further:

'In Magadha there have appeared till now
Impure teachings devised by those still stained.
Open the doors to the Deathless! Let them hear
The Dhamma that the stainless one has found.
Just as one who stands on a mountain peak
Can see below the people all around,
So, O wise one, all-seeing sage,
Ascend the palace of the Dhamma.
Let the sorrowless one survey this human breed,
Engulfed in sorrow, overcome by birth and old age.
Arise, victorious hero, caravan leader,
Debtless one, and wander in the world.
Let the Blessed One teach the Dhamma,
There will be those who will understand.'

Then I listened to the Brahmā's pleading, and out of compassion for beings I surveyed the world with the eye of a Buddha. Surveying the world with the eye of a Buddha, I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and hard to teach, and some who

dwelled seeing fear and blame in the other world. Just as in a pond of blue or red or white lotuses, some lotuses that are born and grow in the water thrive immersed in the water without rising out of it, and some other lotuses that are born and grow in the water rest on the water's surface, and some other lotuses that are born and grow in the water rise out of the water and stand clear, unwetted by it; so too, surveying the world with the eye of a Buddha, I saw beings with little dust in their eyes and with much dust in their eyes, with keen faculties and with dull faculties, with good qualities and with bad qualities, easy to teach and hard to teach, and some who dwelled seeing fear and blame in the other world. Then I replied to the Brahmā Sahampati in stanzas:

'Open for them are the doors to the Deathless,
Let those with ears now show their faith.
Thinking it would be troublesome, O Brahmā,
I did not speak the Dhamma subtle and sublime.'

Then the Brahmā Sahampati thought: 'The Blessed One has consented to my request that he teach the Dhamma.' And after paying homage to me, keeping me on the right, he thereupon departed at once.

Majjhimanikāya (I, 167-73) Ariyapariyesana-sutta

Disciples to Teach the Dhamma

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Baranasi in the Deer Park at Isipatana. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus: "Bhikkhus!" "Venerable sir!" those bhikkhus replied. The Blessed One said this:

"Bhikkhus, I am freed from all snares, both celestial and human. You too, bhikkhus, are freed from all snares, both celestial and human. Wander forth, O bhikkhus, for the welfare of the multitude, for the happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the good, welfare, and happiness of devas and humans. Let not two go the same way. Teach, O bhikkhus, the Dhamma that is good in the beginning, good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end, with the right meaning and phrasing. Reveal the perfectly complete and purified holy life. There are beings with little dust in their eyes who are falling away because they do not hear the Dhamma. There will be those who will understand the Dhamma. I too, bhikkhus, will go to Senanigama in Uruvela in order to teach the Dhamma.

Samyuttanikāya (I, 236)